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Risks of Nanotechnology Make Headlines in Germany

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Biotechnology

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Report Highlights:

In an October 2009 report, the German Federal Office for the Environment (Umweltbundesamt, UBA) released a background paper on nanotechnology which highlighted the potential positive impact of nanotechnology. However, it also said that consumption of nanotech particles should be avoided until more risk analysis has been undertaken and that food should be labeled for nanotech content in order to provide consumers information and choice. Press reports focused on this negative message. The entire report can be viewed (in German) at <http://www.umweltdaten.de/publikationen/fpdf-l/3765.pdf>.

General Information:

On October 21, the German Federal Office for the Environment (Umweltbundesamt, UBA) released report entitled "Nanotechnology for People and the Environment: Expanding Opportunities and

Limiting Risks.” In its conclusions, the 27-page report proposes a register of products containing nano-scaled materials and a product label informing the consumer about the use of nano materials. Furthermore the report proposes that consumers should avoid using and consuming products containing nano-scaled materials or products which release such materials as long as the impact of nano materials on the environment and on health are not sufficiently researched. The UBA also states that the ‘Blue Angel’ label (Blauer Engel) should not be allowed on products containing nano-sized materials. The Blue Angel is a label used on products that are deemed to be friendlier to the environment than other products.

The paper, in part, is supportive for the new technology, reporting that in 2008 more than 800 companies are applying the technology, and numbers were increasing rising. The paper states that the industry sees a potential for a market of about \$1.0 billion worldwide in the near-term. The paper provides a long list of technical applications and mentions multiple advantages resulting from this technology. While the report highlights these future opportunities, it cautions that risk research should be intensified and that the consumer should have a choice to buy or to products containing avoid nano-scaled materials. Nonetheless the paper concludes that public perception of nanotechnology is generally positive and that people associate new effective solutions with applications of the technology.

The report immediately caught wide public attention. The press headlines primarily focused on risks resulting from the use of nano-scaled particles in industrial and in food production. Articles were entitled ‘Sick through Nanotechnology’, ‘How Dangerous is Nanotechnology?’, or ‘Danger of Nanotechnology’. The German food processing industry publically responded that nano-scaled materials are not yet used by German food manufacturers but that research underway regarding food packaging containing nano materials.

The full-scale paper is accessible on the internet at following address:

<http://www.umweltdaten.de/publikationen/fpdf-l/3765.pdf> .

A definition of the Blue Angel label can be found at the following internet address:

<http://www.blauer-engel.de>